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Former Gov. Malcolm Wilson, 86, Is Dead

By **WOLFGANG SAXON** MARCH 14, 2000

Malcolm Wilson, who spent 15 years as Nelson A. Rockefeller's lieutenant governor and one year as governor of New York, died yesterday at his daughter's home in New Rochelle. He was 86.

Long the understudy (and after 36 years of state service in all), Mr. Wilson finally became governor in November 1973, when Mr. Rockefeller resigned, and inherited a growing fiscal crisis. A year later, Mr. Wilson was swept from office in the post-Watergate Democratic landslide, losing to Hugh L. Carey by more than 800,000 votes.

Known as a consummate parliamentarian, Mr. Wilson spent 20 years in the State Assembly and then, as lieutenant governor, presided over the State Senate. His command of the rules was such that, even as they complained, Democrats could not help but express admiration for Mr. Wilson's political skills.

Mr. Wilson, who often lapsed into Latin and kept an unfailingly cheerful mien in public, often gave the impression of being too erudite, too much the gentleman and too lacking in concern for appearances to play the roughhouse game of politics. In the mid-1970's, he refused his aides' pleas to give up the narrow ties he wore, then badly out of fashion, insisting that they were still perfectly good.

Gov. George E. Pataki yesterday described Mr. Wilson as "a wonderful human being" who, to his detriment, disdained talk of politics and the careful positioning politicians engage in. He recalled that in the 1974 campaign, reporters peppered the governor with questions about President Ford's pardon of Richard M. Nixon. Mr. Wilson disagreed with the pardon, said Mr. Pataki -- who was then a young lawyer working on Republican campaigns -- but Mr. Wilson would not say so because he thought it irrelevant to his post.

"There were a lot of political issues that could have been attractive and could have helped him in the campaign," Mr. Pataki said. "But what he wanted to focus on was policy."

In 1938, at age 24, Mr. Wilson was first elected to the Assembly from a district that included his hometown, Yonkers. Using skills acquired as a member of the Fordham University debating team and an eye for detail, he became known for his ability to get his bills passed. One of the best known created the Higher Education Assistance Corporation, which made college loans widely available for the first time in the state.

In 1958, he threw in his lot with Mr. Rockefeller, scion of the nation's wealthiest family, who had never before run for office. Mr. Wilson became a political tour guide

of sorts, driving Mr. Rockefeller about the state to introduce him to local chieftains eager for a fresh candidate.

Quietly and just the two of them, they made the rounds in Mr. Wilson's own car in order not to flaunt the novice's immense wealth. Mr. Wilson sold his man, who then insisted that Mr. Wilson be chosen as his running mate.

Some looked upon Mr. Rockefeller as a sacrificial lamb to run against Gov. W. Averell Harriman, the Democratic incumbent. But Mr. Rockefeller beat the odds and Mr. Wilson stood in his shadow for the next nearly 15 years. Although the law severely limits the lieutenant governor's executive functions, Mr. Rockefeller put Mr. Wilson's vast expertise and connections to use by making him a member of his inner circle.

Through those years, the two men publicly differed on only one issue of principle. Unlike Governor Rockefeller, Mr. Wilson -- a Roman Catholic -- opposed the legalization of abortion. He was generally considered a conservative but, rejecting such political labeling, he defined himself as "an economic conservative and a human-rights liberal."

Forever loyal, he never spoke ill of the ever-upward spiral of spending and debt under Mr. Rockefeller that led to the fiscal crisis, though friends and aides said it doubtless contradicted his own instincts.

As the enduring No. 2, Mr. Wilson always presented a proper, for the most part amiable, face to the world. At the same time, it was no secret in Albany that he would not mind dropping the "lieutenant" from his title once Mr. Rockefeller moved on to indulge his well-known higher ambitions. As he waited, Mr. Wilson presided over the Senate with a ready gavel and an intimidating command of Robert's Rules of Order.

Aside from his mastery of the state budget, Mr. Wilson had a hand in shaping the Governor's priorities. It was he who persuaded Mr. Rockefeller to press for federal revenue sharing to help states that were in financial straits, an idea Mr. Rockefeller successfully pushed after Mr. Nixon won the White House in 1968.

At age 59, Mr. Wilson, by then a grandfather, got his big chance when Mr. Rockefeller, his presidential ambitions thwarted, grew bored with state government and resigned. (The following year, President Ford named Mr. Rockefeller as his vice president).

One of Mr. Wilson's worries as governor was the growing practice by local governments, particularly New York City, of financing local government expenses with a dubious array of fiscal gimmickry. At one point, he admonished, there must come the day of reckoning, as New York City soon learned when it came near financial collapse.

But the first piece of the fiscal crisis to break into view occurred in Mr. Wilson's own bailiwick, at the state's Urban Development Corporation, which flirted with bankruptcy -- an issue Mr. Carey used against him in the 1974 campaign. After taking office, Mr. Carey accused his predecessor of having tried to hide the severity of the crisis, and asserted that Mr. Wilson's outgoing administration had granted him "limited access and little rapport" during the transition.

After losing office, Mr. Wilson was at first an active political fund-raiser and a sought-after speaker at party functions. But increasingly, liberal Rockefeller Republicanism fell from favor, and Mr. Wilson faded from the political scene. He returned to his law practice and served as chairman and chief executive officer of the Manhattan Bank for Savings from 1977 to 1986.

His wife, the former Katharine McCloskey, died in 1980. In 1991, Mr. Wilson underwent surgery for an aortic aneurism, then experienced serious complications. Since then, he had lived with his daughter Katharine Wilson Conroy, a lawyer and former member of the New Rochelle City Council. In addition to Ms. Conroy, he is survived by another daughter, Anne Matthews of Freehold, N.J., and six grandsons.

Charles Malcolm Wilson was born Feb. 26, 1914, in New York City, one of four children in a family of Irish and Scottish ancestry. His first name eventually disappeared, to distinguish him from his father, Charles H. Wilson, a patent attorney who had made an unsuccessful run for the Assembly in 1912. His mother, Agnes, served as a member of national Republican women's groups and as a district party leader in Yonkers, where the family moved in 1920.

Malcolm Wilson graduated from Fordham Preparatory School at 15, Fordham College at 19 and Fordham Law School at 22, in 1936. He spent his entire legal career with the White Plains firm that would become Kent, Hazzard, Jaeger, Greer, Wilson & Fay, becoming a partner in 1946.

He enlisted in the Navy in 1943 and oversaw a gun crew on an ammunition ship that shuttled across the Atlantic and supported the landings at Normandy and Anzio. He kept his Assembly seat, winning re-election in absentia, and returned to New York in 1945 with the rank of lieutenant j.g.

As a government official, aides said, Mr. Wilson was addicted to detail and studied tomes of reports that caused lesser mortals to doze off. His discourses on the affairs of state tended to be soporific, although no Albany insider would have disputed his ability to grapple with complex issues.

In fact, Mr. Wilson had a distaste for the oversimplification so common to politics. Beware of simple answers, he warned, quoting the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt: "The essence of tyranny is the denial of complexity."

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